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## Inservice Training Day: It's not an us and them thing

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“What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what children learn (What matters most: Teaching for America's future, pp.5).”

Education may be one of the only professions in which the formal knowledge base is generated by a group of individuals who do not practice on a daily basis.

As a result, an equally powerful, but non-legitimized, knowledge base has emerged and molds the values, dispositions and roles of educators in the P-12 system. These two knowledge bases clash and the people who represent them

often find themselves at odds. *Inservice Training Day* is one example of the way that these competing perspectives are played out. The formal knowledge base is, for the most part, constructed by researchers at universities and funded research organizations. Their work is published and formalized in texts and journals. Careful thought is given to how to disseminate research findings. For instance, systems change projects employ a variety of techniques to develop networks of practicing professionals who can influence and model the most recent “best practices.” School systems spend a portion of their budget each year to involve experts in professional development activities. *Inservice Training Day* represents the results of those efforts. You might think of practicing educators as fans at a baseball game. Researchers field their various methodologies and perspectives on practice problems and engage in a game that a knowledgeable audience observes but rarely incorporates into its own practices.

Instead, the baseball fans go home, and, if they do play themselves, it is a game that is similar, but not the same, as the one they observed at the baseball stadium. The balls are a different size, the diamond has different dimensions, the rules are changed, and the skills of the participants are based on

their own capacities and talents. There are different games such as slow and fast pitch softball, that are like

**Create schools that are genuine learning organizations**

We recommend: that schools be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers – organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding (What matters most: Teaching for America's future, pp.101).”

baseball, but not quite. Yet policy in schools and accountability measures for teachers are based on the game played at the professional stadium by people who do not practice in the other arena. Even the words that we use to identify the various roles that are played out in the education profession illustrate the role distinctions under which the field operates: researcher, professor, teacher, principal, expert, practitioner.

Researchers and funding organizations are well aware of the schism between practice and the current research base. The research agenda that came out of the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1997) acknowledges the current dichotomy between research and practice and encourages broader participation in identifying the research priorities for the coming fiscal year. Richard Elmore (1996), in an analysis of the failure to influence and sustain profound changes in the way that teaching and learning occurs, notes the number of reform efforts that have been undertaken in this country since the 1920s. For the most part, teachers have remained recipients rather than participants in the reform efforts. The report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (What matters most : Teaching for American's future, 1996), emphasizes the need to focus on and support the development of expertise in practitioners. Yet, until practitioners themselves are deeply engaged in practice inquiry that is legitimized, research about best practice will remain largely outside of the classroom.

Some current reform efforts are focusing on teachers as the linchpin for changes in practice. For instance, the National Network of Educational Renewal (Goodlad, 1994) focuses on partnerships between P-12 schools and Schools or Colleges of Education. In this approach, each partnership involves faculty from both organizations on-site, at a public school. Teacher candidates alongside faculty from both institutions learn their profession by focusing on three functions: inquiry, exemplary practice, and professional development. Inquiry is linked to the school improvement process and involves all members of the school community. Even parents engage in defining problems, developing inquiry approaches, collecting and

analyzing information. By involving school communities in inquiry about their own problems, the theory is that practice will be informed by authentic and context-rich research.

Practice-based inquiry is on trial. We do not yet know that empowerment models of inquiry and evaluation (Fetterman, et. al. 1997) will encourage a body of practice based on a growing knowledge base grounded in a variety of research methodologies. The practitioners engaged in this work will be able to tell us about whether such a process moves the field to a practice base that is grounded in the work of inquiry.

Every reformer fears and hopes that their good idea will be adopted. Like whole language or phonics, or family science, good ideas are taken out of context and adopted on a whole-scale basis outside of the context and often, the purpose, for which they were originally designed. Good ideas in large-scale adoption models are often diluted and eventually, abandoned. The good idea goes to the pendulum graveyard as another example of the fads that sweep the system. Practice-based inquiry could succumb to the same misery. If inquiry becomes another activity that teachers must engage in, rather than replacing old forms of professional development, it will fail in its usefulness to individuals and it will tax system resources.

How can schools support inquiry? One strategy might be to reconceptualize professional development as ongoing activity rather than as a series of events like inservice day. Professional development funds might be distributed at the beginning of the school year by a team of teacher leaders who review inquiry proposals from individuals or workgroups. In the last quarter of the school year, work groups or individuals could share the results of their work through a variety of print and electronic media.

Expert practitioners in many fields hone their skills through reflective practice and inquiry (Schon, 1983). The best teachers in our public schools do the same, in spite of systems that may not honor and support this process. Yet, as Elmore notes (1996) a system cannot improve itself unless it takes notice of the paths that individuals have taken to excellence and then reforms itself so others can construct similar paths.

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